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Municipal Building (Des Moines City Hall)
East First and Locust Street
Des Moines
Polk County
Iowa

HABS No. IA-152

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

AMERICA'S CITY HALLS PROJECT

Name: Proper Name - Municipal Building
Secondary Name - Des Moines City Hall

Location: East First and Locust Street, City of Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa.
The Municipal Building is bounded on the north by Grand Avenue,
on the east by East First Street, on the south by Locust Street,
and on the west by the Des Moines River

Present Owner: City of Des Moines, Iowa

Present Occupant: City Staff

Present Use: Municipal Offices

Significance

The Municipal Building, Des Moines' City Hall, is significant for a number of reasons. The building is closely associated with the "Des Moines Plan" Commission form of government, a landmark State Supreme Court decision on womens suffrage, and is a part of a riverfront improvement project that began in about 1899 and has continued off and on to the present, albeit in a modified and expanded form.

Designed in the Beaux Arts classical style of civic architecture, the Municipal Building was to be a monument to the commission form of government. It was said that"the designers of the home for this form of government concentrated their talents, souls and efforts to produce a city hall that would be in keeping with it".¹ The election to change to the commission form of government and to build a new city hall was held on June 7, 1907, both passed.

In 1908 the first city government was elected under the "Des Moines Plan". The "Des Moines Plan" was based on the "Galveston Plan", but differed from it in several ways. It provided for non-partisan elections and recall of elected officials. It was influenced by the Progressive Era reforms sweeping the nation

during this period.

Design and construction of the Municipal Building was delayed by a lawsuit brought by the women's suffrage movements. Iowa law provided that women could vote on issues involving bonding and taxation. The law wasn't enforced and a suit was filed to throw out the referendum approving the construction of the new City Hall. After losing in the lower courts the suffragettes won at the Supreme Court level.² In Coggeshall vs. City of Des Moines (138 Iowa 730), the Court upheld the right of the women to vote. A second referendum was held on November 1, 1908 and the new City Hall was approved.

As designed the primary feature of the Municipal Building is the Main Room or Counting Room. The room is large and open, in this way city business could be conducted on an open business-like basis. All city departments could be accessed by the citizens on this one floor. Having open spaces also prevented government employees from loafing behind closed doors.³ The City Hall was given the name, Municipal Building in order to remove it from the taint that the name City Hall had before the commission form of government was adopted.⁴

Finally, the Municipal Building was a part of a plan for a Civic Center and approach to the State Capitol. The Plan, as prepared by one of the earliest recognized experts in City planning, Charles Mulford Robinson, was a bringing together of the efforts being made to improve the Des Moines riverfront.

Robinson was hired by the City Council at the urging of the Des Moines Women's Club in August of 1909.⁵ This plan of the "City Beautiful" period has survived in modified form until the present time. The construction of the Municipal Building on the east side of the Des Moines River, an area of dirty warehouses and industrial buildings, was a symbol of the City's commitment to improve the entire riverfront.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History

Date of erection: 1910-11. Piles for the Municipal Building's foundation arrived in Des Moines in January of 1910 and construction began soon afterwards.⁶ On June 14, 1910, cornerstone-laying ceremonies were held. The day was proclaimed a "Municipal Day" and, in order to make the event a national one, more than 5,000 invitations were sent to cities and organizations throughout the United States. The structure was declared to be the first monument to the commission form of government.⁷ Ceremonies included a parade display of City equipment and speeches by public officials and out of town guests which continued on into the night at the Coliseum. It was described by the Register and Leader as "the greatest civic demonstration ever given by an American City". Des Moines was "lauded for her accomplishments by scores of distinguished visitors from dawn until midnight".⁸ Speakers included James G. Berryhill, the recognized father of the "Des Moines plan of commission government".

By comparison, the dedication of the building on January 1, 1912, was a subdued affair. A parade was held, F. E. Wetherell (representing the associated architects) released the building to the City, and the dedication speech was given by Senator A. B. Cummins.⁹

Architects: A consortium of architects was formed. Four prominent architectural firms were hired June 18, 1909. These firms united for this project under the name of Associated Architects. Each drawing carries the name of each architect. As the result of a conflict over which city commissioner would oversee the construction, it was decided that the Associated Architects would oversee the construction of the building. The four firms which participated in the design of the building were as follows:

Liebbe, Nourse and Rasmussen
Hallett and Rawson
Wetherell and Gage
Proudfoot and Bird

The following short biographies are from the National Register Nomination prepared by the Des Moines Plan and Zoning Department in 1977. Additional information and sources can be found in the attached National Register Nomination.

Liebbe, Nourse and Rasmussen

Liebbe, Henry F.

Known as the "Father of Iowa Architecture", Henry F. Liebbe was associated with the early architectural development of Des Moines. At various stages in his career he was in partnership with: William Foster (another prominent Des Moines architect) (1884-1899); Oliver O. Smith, (1896-1899); as well as senior partner in the famous Liebbe, Nourse and Rasmussen firm. He was also the first State Architect, which was established in 1900. He died in Des Moines on June 4, 1927, at the age of 75.

Rasmussen, Edward F.

Born in 1867 in Owatonna, Minnesota. His early practice in Iowa was with McLaughlin Architectural firm in Sioux City where he is credited with designing the Securities National Bank in that city. He joined in partnership with H. F. Liebbe and Clinton Nourse in 1900. While there he is credited with designing several residences in the City and some commercial buildings including: The Utica Store and the Iowa National Bank. He is listed in the Who's Who of Des Moines, published in 1929. He died a bachelor on October 13, 1930, in Des Moines.

Nourse, Clinton

Unfortunately nothing was found on Clinton Nourse other than it is believed he retired to Los Angeles, California, in 1918 or 1919.

Hallett & Rawson

Hallett, George E.

Little is known about George Hallett other than he was a carpenter by trade and first opened an architectural firm in Des Moines in 1891. He was a partner with Clinton Nourse in 1892 until 1899 when he joined with Rawson. It is believed he died in 1913 or 1914 in California.

Rawson, Harry D.

Born in Des Moines in 1873 and died in 1934. During his life, he was associated with the leading architectural firms (Proudfoot & Bird) and was the first registered architect in the State of Iowa. He is associated with the design of the Iowa-Des Moines National Bank, Polk County Tuberculosis Hospital, and the U. S. Post Office in Dubuque. He was listed in Who's Who in Des Moines (1929), Harlan's People of Iowa (1931), and in Biographies of Deceased Architects.

Wetherell & Gage

Frank E. Wetherell

Born in Malta, Ohio on September 5, 1869, Frank Wetherell placed his personal signature on the City of Des Moines since his arrival in 1905. He is personally credited with the design of Mercy Hospital, St. Joseph's Academy, Hubbell, Brooks, and Sabin Schools, St. Mark's, YMCA, and the Wetherell Apartments in Des Moines. However, some of his greatest achievements were in various civic improvements such as the design of the river wall and Keosauqua Way. He was also instrumental in the "City Beautiful" campaign in the 1920's which saw a renewed emphasis in the riverfronts. He was listed in the 1929 issue of Who's Who in Des Moines and Brigham's History of Polk County. He died on October 6, 1961 in Des Moines.

Alvin J. Gage

Born in 1873 in Winona, Minnesota, Alvin J. Gage received his formal education at the University of Pennsylvania and his architectural experience with McKim, Mead and White where he worked for three years. He also worked in St. Paul, Minnesota, before moving to Des Moines in 1899 where he worked for Smith and Gutterson. After Gutterson's death in 1901, he became a partner with Smith and they worked together until 1904, at which time Gage left for Paris where he studied architecture until 1906 when he returned to Des Moines. He then joined the firm of Smith and Wetherell which later became Wetherell and Gage. During his career, Gage is credited with the design of the Courthouses located in Centerville, Leon and Sigourney. After his separation with Wetherell in 1925, his history is not known.

Proudfoot & Bird

William T. Proudfoot

Born in Warren County near Indianola, Iowa, on May 2, 1860, William Proudfoot is one of the most documented architects that has worked in Des Moines. His primary education was at the Institute of Technology at Boston and he worked for Foster and Liebbe in Des Moines, as well as firms in Wichita, Kansas and Salt Lake City, Utah. In 1896 he joined with George Bird to form Proudfoot and Bird which became the most well known firm in Des Moines. They were joined by Rawson in 1910. He died in Des Moines on June 8, 1928.

George Washington Bird

Very little is known about George Bird. However, what is known about him is very impressive. He apparently was the designer of the majority of buildings credited to Proudfoot-Bird. Buildings such as: The First Methodist Church, Polk County Courthouse and the Flynn Building in Des Moines; the Courthouse in Adel; and Beardshear Hall, Agricultural Hall, and Engineering Hall at Iowa State University are a few examples. He apparently died in California at the age of 99.

Source: William J. Wagner

Builder, Contractor, Suppliers: Charles Weitz' Sons was selected as the low bidder for construction of the City Hall on December 1, 1909. Their bid of \$301,960 was based on the use of Tennessee marble rather than the Kasota marble which was preferred by the Associated Architects. The Benson and Marxer Company protested the award and claimed that they should be given the contract if Kasota marble, as specified, were actually used, they should receive the contract, as they were the lowest bidder.¹⁰ On December 1, 1909, the City Council awarded the contract to Charles Weitz' Sons based on their bid using Tennessee marble, however, before doing so they passed a resolution leaving the choice of marble to be used to the architects.¹¹ The contract was approved by the City Council on December 31, 1909.¹² Construction drawings prepared by Charles Weitz' Sons indicate that Kasota marble from Minnesota was used in the actual construction.

The Weitz firm has been operating continuously in Des Moines since 1855 and ownership has remained in the Weitz family. The 1959 Engineering News Record listed the firm as the 13th oldest general contractor in the United States and the oldest west of the Mississippi in continuous operation.¹³ The Weitz firm built the previous City Hall in 1882. Among existing structures built by the company are Lexington Apartments and part of Fort Des Moines, both on the National Register of Historic Places; the Younkers Building and Hotel Fort Des Moines, both of which are listed as Architecturally Significant Structures.¹⁴

Other known contractors or suppliers were Garver Hardware Company, Spencer Turbine Cleaner Company, and Hahl Automatic Clock Company.¹⁵

Original Plans and Construction: The original plans for the Municipal Building are in the possession of the Des Moines Engineering Department, East First and Locust Streets, Des Moines, Iowa, 50307, and micro-filmed copies are available. Shop drawings prepared as the building was constructed are still in the possession of the Weitz firm. These drawings are on tracing cloth. The contracts associated with construction of the Municipal Building are believed to be destroyed. The exterior of the building has not been significantly altered.

Alterations and additions: There have been no additions to the Municipal Building. Various alterations of the interior have occurred over time. Alterations to the exterior of the building have been relatively minor. Modern thermo-break windows, aluminum with a duranodic finish have replaced the original windows. The new windows are compatible in style with the old windows. This work was completed by the Swanson Gentleman Company in 1979. Two of the west side doors were closed off during the 1950's as a result of the construction of offices in the vestibule.

Interior changes have been more extensive. Various remodeling jobs and division of larger rooms into smaller has taken place over the years as City departments have grown. This work was most often completed by City employees and very few records were retained on the work completed. It would be possible to compare the existing layout with the original plans.

Most of the really significant changes in the structure occurred during the 1970's as the result of federal requirements. Interior stairways were added to provide additional fire escape routes. Work was completed in 1981 by Lovejoy Construction. An elevator was also added in 1976 by the Iowa Missouri Construction Company.

Historical Context

The Municipal Building was the first building to be constructed on the Eastside as a part of the "Civic Center Plan" for cleaning up and improving the Des Moines Riverfront. As a direct result of the construction of the Municipal Building on the Eastside and the impetus it generated, additional public buildings were constructed along the east side of the Des Moines River. This is a part of the story of the East versus West conflict in Des Moines that goes back to the battle for the location of the State Capitol in 1857. Additional public buildings constructed along the east side of the river include the Federal Court House, Municipal Court House and the American Legion Armory Building which is used for City offices. Efforts to beautify and improve the Des Moines riverfront have continued to the present.

During the 1918-20 period, during Thomas Fairweather's term as mayor, the City Hall was the site of stormy protest by those opposed to implementing the first phase of a plan to connect city parks with a boulevard system. Even though Keo Way was constructed, the resistance to the plan resulted in general loss of support and unfortunately it wasn't completed.¹⁶ The idea of creating a boulevard system in the City continued to be promoted by civic leaders into the 1920's and 30's, however, development of land along the proposed route eventually made the system impractical.¹⁷

From 1916 to 1932 a modified plan of beautification for the riverfront and development of the "Civic Center Plan" continued. A Municipal Court House and

Federal Court House were built on the east side of the Des Moines River. In 1926 a Zoning Ordinance was passed and the City Plan and Zoning Commission began to meet in the Municipal Building.¹⁸

The City Council members and mayors from 1932 to 1942 participated in the development of a number of civic improvements. A one million dollar airport was constructed on the City's south side.¹⁹ Public works projects, the result of federal programs designed to employ persons during the depression, resulted in the construction of the river walls in the downtown area. These walls were originally a part of the "Civic Center Plan" prepared for Des Moines by Charles Mulford Robinson in 1909.²⁰ The American Legion Memorial Armory was also completed during this period.

In 1950, after 42 years of the Commission form of government, Des Moines switched to the City Manager form of government. It seems that the Commission form of government resulted in many problems as the Commissioners had both legislative and administrative functions.²¹

One of the most important political figures in Des Moines from the late 1800's until 1928 was John MacVicar. During this period John MacVicar served three terms as mayor, the first in 1896 and the last in 1928 in which he died while mayor of Des Moines. He also served a number of terms as Commissioner of Streets and Public Works and as Commissioner of Public Safety. MacVicar also published an article on the Des Moines Municipal Building in a 1912 edition of The American City. Today, I-235 is named MacVicar Freeway in his honor. His son, John MacVicar Jr., served two terms as mayor during the 1940's.²²

It was under the Commission form of government that the first women were elected to the City Council. The first was Mrs. C. H. Morris who served three terms from 1922 to 1928. Emma K. Blaize served from 1930 to 1932 and Francette Miller from 1932 to 1934. Interestingly all served as Commissioners of Finance.²³

PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Description of the Exterior

The Municipal Building is a combination two and three story building, 77.6' wide and 231' long. There is a basement, ground floor, first floor and second floor. The dominant feature of the building is the first floor Main Room, also called the "barn". This long barrel-vaulted room occupies the entire first floor of the central block of the building. This area can be identified by the two story nine-bay arcade which encloses it. Ceiling height in this large main room is 36'.

Symmetrical in design, the east and west sides of the building are almost identical except for the lack of a balcony over the east entrance and two additional entrances on the third bay from each end.

Foundations are of concrete, built on concrete pilings. The main walls are brick faced at the base with granite and above the granite with buff colored limestone. Original interior partitions are of terra-cotta tile and floors of reinforced concrete. Columns and girders are steel covered with concrete. The roof is constructed of steel and reinforced concrete.

Description of the Interior

As stated previously, the Main Room is the dominate feature of the Municipal Building. It is 67' wide and 126' long. A few private offices are provided on each end of the Main Hall. Originally, these were for the City Commissioners. The remainder of the room is open. A hall 16' wide extends through the middle of the room from end to end. A long marble counter separates the hall from working spaces. Entrances, the Main Room and public halls are wainscotted with Kasota or a gray marble, believed to be Tennessee marble. Floors are marble in the public halls, entrances, landings, and Council Chambers. Other floor areas

are cement. Floor designs were prepared using Kasota marble in combination with Sylvan Green marble and Roseal marble. In some areas Sylvan Green marble is used along the base of the wainscott. Woodwork is stained white oak.

The most interesting interior feature is the ceiling in the Main Room which has extensive ornamental plasterwork which has recently been repainted.

Mechanical systems include a one pipe steam system with a gas fired boiler for heating. The original system was coal fired. The ventilation system has been changed to a refrigerated air system. Air conditioning units were added in 1966 and are located in the attic. One of the most interesting mechanical systems in the original building was the pneumatic clock system in the Main Room. It was purchased from the Hahl Automatic Clock Company. The system apparently never worked very well as the clocks kept poor time and often broke down. After having been out of service for a number of years, the City decided to convert the clocks to electricity. Work was completed on this conversion during the 1970's and the clocks are running again.

Site

The Municipal building is sited on the east side of the Des Moines River. As designed, the building faces both east and west. Why this is so isn't clear, however, the east side versus the west side conflict may have had a bearing on the decision to face the building in two directions. Another factor may have been that the Municipal Building was a part of the "Civic Center Plan" for beautifying the riverfront. The Library across the River was designed to face the River. It would seem to make sense for the Municipal Building to also face the River. Today the main entrance to the Municipal Building is on the east side as two of the main doors on the west side have been closed off as the result of the constructing of offices in the old west side vestibule.

Landscaping around the Municipal Building is somewhat limited as the building is located on a relatively small parcel. Originally, the west side of the site included considerable landscaping which included a pool or fountain, walkways and benches. Currently, there is a river wall built during the 1930's though the idea goes back to the "Civic Center Plan" of 1909. During the early 1960's the original landscaping was altered by a flood control project which raised the banks on the east side of the river and a concrete dike or wall was also added. Current landscaping consists of foundation plantings, flowers, and a few ornamental trees along the river.

NOTES

- ¹ Register and Leader, 12 June 1910.
- ² Woman's Standard (Waterloo, Iowa) January, March, May, August, December, 1908.
- ³ Register and Leader, 12 June 1910.
- ⁴ Johnson Brigham, Des Moines and Polk County, 2 Vols. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co. 1911), p. 628.
- ⁵ City of Des Moines, Iowa, Journal of City Council, Roll Call No. 2250, August 20, 1909.
- ⁶ "Pile Drivers for City Hall," Evening Tribune, (Des Moines), 13 January 1910
- ⁷ Register and Leader, 12 June 1910.
- ⁸ Register and Leader, 15 June 1910.
- ⁹ "Dedicate City Hall With a Dignified Program," Evening Tribune, (Des Moines) 1 January 1912.
- ¹⁰ "Weitz Firm Will Build City Hall," Evening Tribune, (Des Moines) 1 December 1909.
- ¹¹ City of Des Moines, Iowa, Journal of City Council, Roll Call No. 3236 and 3238, December 1, 1909.
- ¹² City of Des Moines, Iowa, Journal of City Council, Roll Call No. 3475, December 31, 1909.
- ¹³ Interview with Ann Weitz, The Weitz Co. Inc., Des Moines, Iowa, August 1981.
- ¹⁴ John Maves, Des Moines' Heritage, A Survey of Significant Architecture, (Des Moines: Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission, 1976).
- ¹⁵ "Hardware Bids are not Lawful" Evening Tribune, (Des Moines) 11 November 1910, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Scrapbook from City Planning Committee, 1911-1924.
- ¹⁷ Harland Bartholomew and Associates, A Preliminary Major Street Plan for Des Moines, Iowa, (Des Moines: Zoning Commission, 1925) p. 41.
- ¹⁸ City of Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission Board Minutes, unnumber introductory page, 1926.
- ¹⁹ City of Des Moines, Iowa, Municipal Code, 1942, p. VI-XV.

20 Charles Mulford Robinson, City Planning Report for Des Moines, Iowa,
(Des Moines: City of Des Moines 1909/10) p. 42.

21 "Who'll Run," Register, (Des Moines) 26 December 1949.

22 Interview with George Whitmer, Former Mayor and Council Member, Des Moines,
Iowa, August 1981.

23 Ibid.

PART III SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Architectural Drawings:

1. Original Plans, drawn by Associated Architects in 1909, located at:

City Engineering Department
East First and Locust Streets
Des Moines, Iowa 50307

Copies are also available on microfilm.

2. Construction drawings, primarily of the interior of the Municipal Building, drawn in 1910/11. Located at:

The Weitz Company, Inc.
800 Second Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50309

These drawings are generally not available to the public.

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31 December 1909, p. 1.

Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated

1. The last comprehensive History of Des Moines was prepared by Johnson, Brigham in 1911. A great deal of information on the Municipal Building is contained in the State's Historical Building's Newspaper Library in Des Moines, Iowa.
2. There may be additional information related to the "Civic Center Plan" and Associated Women's Clubs of Des Moines in the Club's Archives.

Supplemental Information

Included is a copy of the National Register Nomination which provides more detailed information on the architectural characteristics and historical significance of the Municipal Building.

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August 28, 1981